The Miracle of the Age: Internet in classrooms

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Abstract

Today, web-based projects are widely used in most language learning institutions. In web-based projects, students are usually required to do research on a given topic by using the Internet in order to accomplish a given task. In EMUEPS, students are assigned web-based projects for their portfolios which constitute a part of the continuous assessment system. Dealing with web-based projects seems to be hard work for students as they struggle with using a computer and also the Internet resources at the same time. Teachers also have hard times trying to help students use the Internet resources effectively and efficiently and also to evaluate and give feedback to their students’ project drafts and final copies. The main aim of this research study was to investigate students’ perceptions of web-based projects. The findings of this study looked for improvement in English language learning as a result of integrating web-based projects in the curriculum. 60 students participated in this study. Two sets of data were collected: Internet use survey and student interviews. The results gathered both from the interviews and the survey revealed a positive attitude towards the use of the Internet for portfolio projects.

Keywords: Internet, Web-based projects, Language learning.

1. Introduction

Today, web-based projects are widely used in most language learning institutions. In web-based projects, students are usually required to do research on a given topic by using the Internet in order to accomplish a given task. “The procedure for educating students has shifted from providing them with information to opening doors for them to explore topics and to create meaningful learning experiences for themselves” (Smaldino, S. E. and et al, 2005, p. 118).

In English Preparatory School of the Eastern Mediterranean University (EMUEPS) in North Cyprus, students are assigned web-based projects for their portfolios which constitute a part of the continuous assessment system. The EPS has integrated web-based projects into the curriculum in order to enable the students to use the web resources effectively and efficiently for their academic studies and also help them improve their English language.

2. Statement of the Problem

Dealing with web-based projects seems to be hard work for students as they struggle with using a computer and also the Internet resources at the same time. For example, students who have limited previous experience with the web either find it difficult to retrieve the information they
need or can make no sense of the results of the search. The teachers also have hard times trying to help students use the Internet resources effectively and efficiently and also to evaluate and give feedback to their students’ project drafts and final copies. Therefore, using the web requires additional effort from both parties.

3. Aim of the Research

The teachers and the administrators at the EPS need to know students’ perceptions of using the Internet for their portfolio projects because students’ attitudes towards the Internet directly affect their motivation and interests in using the Internet for their assignments and projects (Tsai as cited in Peng et al, 2006). Therefore, this study will address the following research question:

What are the students’ perceptions of web-based projects at the EMUEPS?

4. Importance of the Research

Using web-based projects is an area which needs further investigation as it takes considerable amount of students’ and teachers’ time that can be devoted to other instructional goals and objectives. These web-based projects constitute a part of student portfolio, meaning that they have an effect on students overall success at the EPS. Both the administration and the teachers will benefit from this research as the results obtained from it will help them gain further insights on the web-based projects and take necessary actions accordingly.

5. Literature Review

5.1. The Use of the Internet in Education

Today, almost all students in all educational settings have a certain experience in using the Internet for academic purposes. According to Peng et al. (2006), the use of the Internet may affect students’ learning outcomes in learning environment. The Internet enables students to reach the recent information in a short time. It also provides students with instant access to an enormous amount of information and thus it enhances their curiosity and desire to learn more (Yumuk, 2002).

5.2. Students’ Perceptions of the Internet

Previous research studies suggested that students’ attitudes towards the Internet directly affect their motivation and interests in Internet-based learning. The students may have different perceptions of the Internet, and these perceptions tend to shape their attitudes and their online behaviors as well (Johnson and Johnson, 2006).

According to a study done in Sheffield University on students’ perceptions of the Internet and its use, the most significant findings were related to gender differences. This study revealed that, female students were unable to find their way around the Internet effectively, thus they often got lost and felt not in control of what they were doing. (D’Esposito and Gardner, 2000). Hong, Ridzuan and Kuek (2003) found that, students who have better computer skills in using the
Internet and who perceive Internet as a supportive tool for their studies, have better attitudes towards using the Internet to improve themselves in their academic studies.

5.3. Internet-based Projects

According to Shiveley and VanFossen (2005), using the Internet in education can serve different purposes. Internet 1. can be used to access to information, 2. enables students to use critical thinking skills while using it, 3. can help facilitate collaboration and communication both within the class and around the world, 4. increases availability to diverse resources and different perspectives and thus lead to more challenging research projects. 5. can help students to construct meaning for themselves.

6. Research Methodology

6.1. Identification of the Population

The population under investigation included students who were enrolled in different levels of the EMUEPS during fall 2007-2008.

6.2. Sample

The sample was selected randomly from class roasters of 2200 students. The participants of this study were 60 students studying at various levels at the EPS.

6.3. Data Collection

Two sets of data were collected for this research study: Internet use survey and student interviews.

7. Data Analysis and Presentation of Findings

7.1. Internet Use Survey Findings

The main purpose of this study was to investigate students’ perceptions of web-based projects based on gender, their English level, computer literacy level, having access to a computer at home, having internet access at home, the aspects of the Internet they usually use and the frequency of using the Internet. The data collected from the Internet use survey were analyzed quantitatively through using Independent T-Test and ANOVA on the SPSS program.

The quantitative data examined demographic data and frequencies for all the items in the survey. Demographic Data

The first seven items of this survey were designed to collect “Personal Data”, including gender, English level, computer literacy level, having access to a computer at home, having internet access at home, the aspects of the Internet they usually use and the frequency of using the Internet. An analysis of the characteristics of the target population for the study indicated that 61.7
% (37) male and 38.3 % (23) female responded to the questionnaire. According to the results of the descriptive statistics, 16.7 % (10) of the students were enrolled in elementary level, 35 % (21) in pre-intermediate level, 23.3% in intermediate level and 25% (15) in upper-intermediate level. In terms of computer literacy level, the results indicate that only 5% (3) of the students identified themselves as beginner level, 55% (33) as intermediate level and 40 % (24) as advanced level. The data also reveals that, 83.3 % (50) of the students either have or can access to a computer at home and 75% (45) of the students have Internet access at home.

In terms of the aspects of the Internet they usually use, using e-mails was marked 36 times, accessing websites 17 times, search engines 40 times, downloading programs 32 times, playing audio or video 25 times, chat rooms only 6 times. According to the results, the search engines is ranked to be the first, e-mail is the second and downloading programs is the third widely used aspects of the Internet. For the frequency of using the Internet, 63.3% (38) of the students stated that, they use the Internet daily, 26.7% (16), 1-3 times a week and 10 % (6) stated that they use the Internet a few times a month.

Frequencies of Individual Items

According to the frequencies of individual items, it is seen that the students who participated in this study were strongly agree, agree, unsure, disagree and strongly disagree with the survey items. The frequencies and the percentages of individual items are shown on Table 1 below.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency and Percentages of individual Items</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I feel very confident of my abilities to use the Internet for my projects.</td>
<td>7 28.3</td>
<td>36 50</td>
<td>60 8.3</td>
<td>1 1.7</td>
<td>1 1.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Using the internet for my projects is time consuming</td>
<td>7 11.7</td>
<td>32 53.3</td>
<td>9 8.3</td>
<td>1 1.7</td>
<td>7 11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I can easily access to any kind of information when I use the internet</td>
<td>3 50</td>
<td>24 40</td>
<td>9 8.3</td>
<td>1 1.7</td>
<td>– –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I prefer using other sources for my projects than the internet</td>
<td>5 8.3</td>
<td>16 26.7</td>
<td>8 13.3</td>
<td>21 35</td>
<td>10 16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I get very nervous when I use the internet</td>
<td>3 5</td>
<td>7 11.7</td>
<td>10 16.7</td>
<td>23 38.3</td>
<td>17 28.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. It is fun to use the internet for my projects</td>
<td>4 23.3</td>
<td>30 50</td>
<td>10 16.7</td>
<td>3 5</td>
<td>3 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Finding appropriate information for my project on the internet is difficult</td>
<td>2 3.3</td>
<td>9 15</td>
<td>17 28.3</td>
<td>21 35</td>
<td>11 18.3</td>
</tr>
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</table>
8. There is no need to use printed materials when you have the internet for your projects

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<th>14</th>
<th>23.3</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>21.7</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>31.7</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>8.3</th>
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9. I always have problems with computers when I use the internet

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<th>8</th>
<th>13.3</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>13.3</th>
<th>23</th>
<th>38.3</th>
<th>17</th>
<th>28.3</th>
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</table>

10. I don’t know how to make best use of search engines for my projects

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<th>6.7</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>18.3</th>
<th>26</th>
<th>43.3</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>11.7</th>
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</table>

11. Using the internet helps me improve my English

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2</th>
<th>41.7</th>
<th>26</th>
<th>43.3</th>
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<th>6.7</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1.7</th>
<th>4</th>
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12. I don’t like using the internet for my projects because there are lots of unknown words

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<th>11.7</th>
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<th>35</th>
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</table>

The data gathered from individual items indicate that the 88.3% of the students feel confident of their abilities to use the Internet for their projects, 65% of the students agreed that using the Internet for the projects is time consuming, 90% stated that they can easily access to any kind of information when they use the Internet. 66.6% of the students disagreed with the idea that they feel very nervous when they use the Internet, 73.3% said that it is fun to use the Internet for their projects. 53.3% stated that finding appropriate information for their project on the Internet is not difficult for them. 38.3% of the students said that there is no need to use printed materials when you have the Internet. On the other hand, 40% of the students disagreed with this item. 66.6% of the students said that they do not have problems with computers when they use the Internet. Only 20% stated that they have problems with the computers. 55% disagree with item 10 which is ‘I don’t know how to make best use of search engines for my projects’. Only 26.7% of the students agreed with this item. For item 11, nearly all, 85% of the students stated that using the Internet helps them improve their English. For the last item, only 18.4% of the students stated that they don’t like using the Internet for their projects because of so many unknown words and 68.3% stated that they disagreed with this idea.

In this research, the independent t-test and ANOVA were used in order to be able to analyze the differences between dependent and independent variables.

_T-test of Individual Items_

The results of the t-test indicates that there is no significant difference between male and female students in the way they perceive the use of Internet for their projects as all obtained values are higher than the standard value which is 0.05.

The results of the independent variable which is ‘having computer at home’, reveals that there is no significant difference between the dependent statements and ‘having computer at home except the values of ‘I feel very confident of my abilities to use the internet for my projects’ (.040) and ‘I don’t like using the Internet for my projects because there are lots of unknown words’ (.027) because all the other obtained values are higher than the standard value: 0.05.
For question 5 which is related to ‘having Internet access at home’, the results indicate that there is no significant difference between this item and the dependent variables except for the three items which are ‘I feel very confident of my abilities to use the Internet for my projects’ (.012), ‘I don’t know how to make best use of search engines for my projects’ (.034), ‘Using the Internet helps me improve my English’ (.040) as all these three values are below the standard value: 0.05.

ANOVA of Individual Items

According to ANOVA results which was done for the English level of the students, there is significant difference between students’ English level and the dependent items 2 ‘using the internet for my projects is time consuming’ and 3 ‘I can easily access to any kind of information when I use the internet’ as both values are .038 which is smaller than the standard value 0.05. In terms of computer literacy level, all the values are above the standard value 0.05, except item 9 ‘I always have problems with computers when I use the Internet’ because the obtained value .000 is far below the standard value 0.05. Thus, we can say that there is significant difference between the students’ computer literacy level and item 9. The results of using different aspects of the Internet reveal no significant difference as all the obtained values are higher than the standard value, 0.05. For the last independent item which is the frequency of using the Internet, the results of the ANOVA indicate that there is meaningful difference only for items 8 (.050) ‘There is no need to use printed materials when you have the internet for your projects’ and 9 (.024) ‘I always have problems with computers when I use the internet’. The first value is equal to the standard value and the second one is below it.

7.2. Student Interviews

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed based on the theme being investigated. The data gathered from the interviews reveal that, all students have used the Internet to complete at least three projects on various topics. When approaching research on the Internet, they used search engines mainly ‘Google’. The data gathered from the interviews can be grouped under three headings:

a. Students’ feelings towards the Internet

The results of the Internet indicate that most of the students were happy with using the Internet for their portfolio projects. 48 students out of 60 stated that using the Internet is more enjoyable than using books. 55 students out of 60 stated that using the Internet enables them to practice reading and learn new words. According to the data gathered, the students who are enrolled in higher levels i.e. intermediate and upper-intermediate have less difficulty in searching the web for their projects. 8 students out of 10 elementary students said that they cannot understand the materials on the web because of their low level of English. Some of them even confessed that they access to Turkish sites, find appropriate materials and then try to translate them into English. Some of the student responses were as follows:

Student 1: “...I don’t understand anything from these web pages I prefer to use books than the Internet.”

Student 12: “...All my resources are in Turkish and now I need someone to translate them into English”
b. Difference between male and female students

According to the data collected from the interviews, the female students seemed to have more difficulties in using the computers especially when they encounter with some technical problems.

Some female students responded in the following way:

Student 23: “...my boyfriend always helps me because he is good at using the computer”

Student 39: “... whenever I access to the Internet, something happens and the computer stops working.”

On the other hand, the male students seemed to be more confident in using a computer and also using the Internet.

c. Having experience in using a computer and the Internet

Also, the students who had previous knowledge and experience on the use of computers and the Internet seemed to have the self-confidence and the ability to navigate around the web to reach the relevant information they need. On the other hand, the ones who have recently got acquainted with the computers and the Internet had difficulty in using the search engines effectively. Only 7 out of 60 students said that they had not had any experience on the use of the computers and the Internet before they came to study at the EPS.

Some of the student responses are as follows:

Student 4: “...I hadn’t known how to use a computer before I came here, we didn’t have computers in our high school in Van”

Student 23: “...I don’t know how to use a computer but my friends are trying to teach me”

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The data collected from the interviews complement the data collected from the survey. The results gathered both from the interviews and the survey reveal a positive attitude towards the use of the Internet for portfolio projects. The data clearly indicate that the computers and the Internet play an important role in their daily and academic lives of the students as most of them have access to a computer and the Internet at home. The results also reveal that the students can use computers and the Internet effectively and efficiently. Most students participated in the study identified themselves as intermediate level in terms of using a computer. Moreover, only a few said that they have problems in using the Internet. The interview results indicate that Elementary level students have problems in understanding the sources and materials because of their low level of English. Some of the Elementary students said that they use Turkish sources from the Internet and try to translate them into English. This is an issue that has to be considered by the teachers and the administration at the EPS. One solution of this problem could be to refer low level students to certain websites which are specially designed for English language learners.

The students participated in this study have positive perceptions of the usefulness of the Internet. Since students have very positive perceptions of using the web for their projects, more Internet-based assignments and tasks could be inserted into the EPS curriculum. Previous research studies suggested that students’ attitudes towards the Internet directly affect their motivation and interests in Internet-based learning. The students at the EPS seem to be ready for the Internet-based instruction.
The results of the statistical tests which are frequencies, independent t-test and ANOVA indicate no significant difference between female and male students in the way they perceive the Internet. The results reveal no meaningful difference between the most statements and the questions: “do you access to a computer at home?” and “do you have Internet access at home?” Only a few values show significant difference between the statements and the two questions. The results of the ANOVA reveal no significant difference between English level of the students, their computer use levels, different aspects of the Internet and frequency of using the Internet and the statements. However, there are some values which are below the standard value 0.05.

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